



Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired Outreach Programs

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Job One for Educators: Becoming a Good Playmate

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Abstract: If children learn through, then we must become better playmates in order to facilitate better learning for the child.

Key Words: programming, blind, deafblind, assessment, appetite/aversion, Active Learning, van Dijk, communication, instruction, routines, model, turn-taking

All human beings are motivated to learn when they find the learning activity interesting, useful or fun. Learning takes place best for us when we are in a calm and alert state. This means that we need to be physically comfortable, feel emotionally or physically safe, and have the physical vigor to be able to interact with people or objects in the environment. Children with visual impairments, deafblindness and other physical and cognitive disabilities are no different from other learners in these requirements. Unfortunately, many of these children may not have the language or physical ability to easily tell us their needs and preferences so we can make learning fun and motivating for them. Often times we feel at a loss for how to begin.

There are some strategies that we know work for these children. One strategy, often discussed by Dr. Jan van Dijk and Dr. Lilli Nielsen, is to follow the child's lead. Another is to build predictable interactions with people and environments through the use of routines or highly structured activities. Barbara Miles reminds us that, children who are deafblind (and to some degree, children who are visually and multiply disabled) use their hands as tools, eyes, ears, voice and also to relieve stress. We also know we need to recognize and respond to any attempt a child makes to communicate if we want to foster the child's communication skills development. Underlying all of these strategies is the notion of making the experience inviting and fun for the child. In short we have to become good playmates for the child.

First Assess

So how can we do this? First we have to get a clear picture of where the child is by thoroughly assessing the child's skills in the areas of vision, hearing, communication, fine and gross motor, emotional development, and cognitive development. We also want to get an idea of the level of play and interaction skills the child uses with people and objects. A list of some resources educators might use to do this assessment is included at the end of this article.

We also need to take a thorough inventory of what the child likes and dislikes, what is often referred to as an Appetite/Aversion assessment. This includes types of sensory input, objects, people, activities or actions, and environments that are preferred or not well tolerated.

Gain the Child's Trust

Once you know where the child is and what is interesting to the child you begin by gaining the child's trust. This means sometimes, simply sitting in the same room as the child and not making any demands upon him. You also show an interest in what the child finds motivating whether that is moving his body a particular way or interacting with particular types of objects. As the child becomes more comfortable with you, you can increase the level and amount of contact with the child until he readily accepts your close proximity and begins to seek you out.

Display the Characteristics of a Good Playmate

When the child trusts you, you are ready to become more of an active playmate. Think about the type of playmates you experienced as a child. Remember when you were required to play with a child at some event you attended with your parents? Did you ever get stuck with the child who was bossy, always controlled the objects or activity, didn't play any of the games you knew and liked or only played games that you were bad at, and who hoarded all the good toys? Did you enjoy that interaction? No! You probably tried to get away from that child as soon as possible. Most of us were happier if we had an opportunity to find a generous playmate, someone willing to share all his toys with us. We wanted someone who was interested in the things that interested us. A good playmate was someone who took turns, and offered new ideas and experiences without demanding that we go along with his suggestion.

As an educator (or parent) working with a child who is deafblind or visually impaired with additional disabilities you must become the good playmate to the child. So how do you do this?

Slow your pace

First of all, consider the pace of your interactions with the child. How fast can this child take in information? How long does it take for the child to physically be able to respond to sensory input? Is the child unsure of what you might do with him and a little fearful of the speed at which you move? A much slower pace than you would typically utilize may be needed. Unless we discipline ourselves to be aware of how fast we are moving around the child, we are likely to frighten him or simply overwhelm him. Step one, slow down.

Be generous

Be generous with the toys you have. Offer the whole toy box and see what the child picks. In order to learn about objects and their properties children have to have a wide variety of objects so they can compare the objects to each other. Typical two-year-olds don't play with one object. They play with many objects in a sequence, often returning to familiar objects to compare with a new object.

Be generous with yourself in your interactions with the child. If the child is interested in continuing the interaction, give him extra turns. Make your hands available for the child to use to as he chooses allowing him to guide you in the interaction. Wait and give him time to consider

how he wants you to respond. Let him know you understand or value what he is trying to tell you by mirroring back what he shows you. This type of generosity is the beginning of many good conversational interactions.

Don't be bossy or controlling

Don't be bossy. Let the child control the activity. Be quiet and don't make demands of the child. For example when you are sharing a ball don't say, "Throw me the ball. Let's put it in the basket." Instead make a variety of balls available to the child and imitate what he does with the ball.

Don't try to control the action or the object. Offer to be a part of the exploration, but respect the child if he refuses your involvement. Don't correct him or tell him he is handling the object incorrectly or not completing the correct action. He will be much more inclined to include you in his game if you aren't trying to take over.

Don't make him share until he is ready

Having duplicates or a sufficient quantity of toys is also an important. This allows you to model things to do with an object without making the child share his toy with you. Remember, at first the child will not be open to sharing his toys with you. He may show you his toy and you can comment on how lovely it is, but don't make the mistake of taking it from him until he insists you have it. It takes longer for some of us to learn to share, so don't rush it.

Be an interesting model

As the child experiences success in the way he is acting on the object you can offer an idea of something new to do by modeling an action. Try to determine what is interesting to the child about that object based on how he is playing with it. Is he fascinated with the shape of the object? Show him how the object's shape will fit with another shape, for example putting the ball into a tube or a container. Is he interested in the texture of the object? Show him a different object with the same texture or offer a very different texture in a similar object for him to compare. Is the child interested in the way the object bounces or sounds when you throw it? Show him how many different objects bounce or sound. Remember, if the child decides he is not interested in what you are showing him you should return to his game. A little later you can try modeling the new action again.

Let the child feel success as well as challenges

Make sure that what you model is only slightly higher developmentally than the the child is currently demonstrating. For example, if the child is taking things out of a container you might show him how to put things in a container. It is important to have a clear notion of the "next step" when you sit down to play with a child so that you don't target skills that are too high.

Educators have a natural tendency to constantly be working on the child's IEP goals, which typically are written just above where the child is able to function. However, to be a good playmate, you need to strike a balance between letting the child feel success by practicing learned skills and challenging him to develop new slightly higher level skills. Let the child be competent in play.

Go from imitation to turn-taking to participating in routines

As the child becomes more inclined to engage with you, slowly work from imitating him to having him imitate you, to setting up turn-taking interactions. Taking a turn is a first step in participating with someone in an activity. Learning a series of steps is what we do when we teach a child a routine. Being able to carry out a routine means that the child has a memory of a series of events that can be expanded on by adding new information.

By being a good playmate we can entice the child to join in with us as we explore the world around us. As good playmates we can share information about actions and interactions that are possible. When we are good playmates, we are also being good educators. When we are good playmate we generally enjoy teaching more.

Resources:

Assessment Tools:

Hagood, Linda. Infused Skills Assessment, Communication A Guide for Teaching Students with Visual and Multiple Impairments, 1997.

Harris, John, Hartshorne, N., Jess, T., Mar, H., Rowland, C., Sall, N., Schmoll, S., Schweigert, P., Unruh, L., Vernon, N., and Wolf, T. Home Talk a Family Assessment of Children who are Deafblind, 2003.

Morgan, E. et al. The INSITE Developmental Checklist, 1989.

Korsten, J.E., Dunn, D.K., Foss, T.V., and Francke, M.K., Every Move Counts, 1993.

Nielsen, Lilli. Functional Scheme, SIKON, 2000.

Rowland, Charity. Communication Matrix, 1997, 2004.

Rowland, Charity and Schweigart, Philip. Home Inventory of Problem Solving Skills, 2002.

Rowland, Charity and Schweigart, Philip. School Inventory of Problem Solving Skills, 2002.

Smith, M. and Shafer, S. Assessment of Biobehavioral States and Analysis of Related Influences, 1995.

Stillman, R. et al. The Callier-Azusa Scale, 1978.

Articles:

Most of these articles are also available in Spanish on the TSBVI website www.tsbvi.edu.

van Dijk Methodology:

Conversations without Language: Building Quality Interactions with Children Who are Deaf-Blind

Looking at Self-Stimulation in the Pursuit of Leisure or I'm Okay, You Have a Mannerism, 1993.

The van Dijk Approach to Child-Guided Assessment, 2002.

Active Learning Theory:

An Introduction to Dr. Lilli Nielsen's Active Learning

Active Learning and the Exploration of Real Objects, 2004.

Five Phases of Educational Treatment Used in Active Learning Based on Excerpts from Are You Blind? , 2004.

Tactual Development:

From ERIC: Tactual Development and Its Implications for the Education of Blind Children. (<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>)

Hand-Over-Hand Guidance: What Lesson Do We Teach?

Routines:

Make It Routine

New Teacher Series: Getting Started with Activity Routines

Routines

Why Are Routines Worth the Trouble?

Communication and Concept Development:

Non-Verbal Communication: Cues, Signals, and Symbols

What a Concept!

Information from Students with Profound Impairments: Gathering Information and Planning Instruction:

Appetite/Aversion Form and Appetite Summary Form

Thoughts on the Assessment of the Student with the Most Profound Disabilities

Books About Active Learning:

<http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/resources/vi&multi/lilli/lillihome.html>

Nielsen, Lilli. The Comprehending Hand, SIKON, 1994.

Nielsen, Lilli. Are You Blind?, SIKON, 1990.

Nielsen, Lilli. Early Learning Step by Step, SIKON, 1993.

Nielsen, Lilli. Space and Self, SIKON, 1992.



Figure 1 IDEAs that Work logo.

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